

Listeners' Attitudes and Sensitivity to Function: the case of two LIKEs

Lisa Bonnici

University of California, Davis

Since the 1980s, the functions of non-traditional LIKE have been extensively examined (Romaine and Lange, 1991; Dailey O'Cain, 2000; Fuller, 2003; D'Arcy, 2005). Functions of LIKE have most commonly been positioned in two subgroups—a discourse introducing or *quotative* LIKE (Romaine and Lange, 1991), and a *discourse (also, pragmatic, focuser)* LIKE (Underhill, 1988; Andersen, 2001; D'Arcy, 2005). Until recently, discourse LIKE has been contentiously debated as to its discourse marker status. Some scholars argue that because LIKE can alter the meaning of an utterance, it cannot lie in the discourse marker category (Fuller, 2003). D'Arcy (2005), which traced the syntactic development and grammaticalization of this elusive form, resolves the debate by naming a new category of LIKE—that of *Approximator* LIKE, which has distinct historical origins to Discourse LIKE (2005). Building on D'Arcy's findings, this study investigates listeners' ability to discern Discourse LIKE from Approximator LIKE and explores variation in their attitudes towards these two LIKE types. An ability to discern LIKE types will indicate whether LIKE users perceive distinctions in linguistic function.

Two speakers, one male and one female were recorded reading four variations each of a single script. The scripts emulated an interview for a high status job; they differed solely in the presence or absence of LIKE and LIKE type as follows: no LIKEs, nine Approximator LIKEs, and nine Discourse LIKEs, and a mixed script contained five Approximator LIKEs and four Discourse LIKEs.

147 participant judges – 90 females, 57 males – listened to the recordings and completed an attitudinal survey where they evaluated the speaker on ten personality characteristics as well as overall suitability for the job in question.

Results on overall suitability ratings showed men to be more harshly evaluated than women when using Discourse LIKE. In contrast, no significant gender differences occurred in both the no LIKE guise and the Approximator LIKE guise. Women's use of Discourse LIKE was the least stigmatized LIKE type. ANOVA analyses were significant for ratings of overall suitability ($p < .001$).

Next, contrary to Dailey-O'Cain (2000) who found LIKE usage to increase solidarity ratings, here, solidarity ratings remained largely uninfluenced by the presence or absence of LIKE. When comparing all guises containing LIKEs to the two no-LIKE guises, differences in cheerfulness, sociability, and attractiveness ratings were not significant (p ranged from .35 to .93). Friendliness and kindness ratings did differ ($p < .02$; $p < .06$, respectively), but in the opposite direction than previously suggested (Dailey-O'Cain 2000). Thus, using LIKE does not increase one's solidarity ratings.

Status ratings, however, do vary significantly across the eight guises. Not surprisingly, both men and women received significantly higher status ratings when the guise lacked LIKEs.

These findings demonstrate listeners' awareness of the distinctions between Discourse and Approximator LIKE, and find Discourse LIKE usage by men less appropriate than women's usage. Ever since Frank Zappa's 1982 Valley Girl song, LIKE has been associated with the speech of Southern California female teenagers, and it appears that usage not conforming to this stereotype is heavily stigmatized

References

- Andersen, Gisle (2001). *Pragmatic Markers and Sociolinguistic Variation*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- D'Arcy, Alexandra Faith (2005). *Like: Syntax and Development*. University of Toronto: Dissertation.
- Dailey-O'Cain, Jennifer (2000). The sociolinguistic distribution of and attitudes toward focuser *like* and quotative *like*. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 4(1): 60-80.
- Fuller, Janet F. (2003). Use of the discourse marker like in interviews. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 7: 365-377.
- Romaine, Suzanne & Lange, Deborah (1991). The use of like as a marker of reported speech and thought: a case of grammaticalization in progress. *American Speech* 66: 227-279.
- Underhill, Robert. (1988). *Like is, like, focus*. *American Speech* 63: 234-246.